Immediate Actions Pennsylvania Must Take to Address the COVID-19 Crisis in Long-Term Care Facilities

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had drastic and tragic effects on Pennsylvania’s long-term care facility residents and the staff who care for them. More than 4,700 long-term care (LTC) residents have died from COVID-19, accounting for 68% of all deaths in Pennsylvania. Immediate action must be taken to improve outcomes for this vulnerable population and to ensure their rights. It is vital that LTC residents and their advocates have a voice in the development of policies in Pennsylvania that are targeted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On August 17, 2020, the Center for Advocacy for the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (CARIE), Community Legal Services of Philadelphia (CLS), and a number of organizations that advocate on behalf of LTC residents released recommendations for immediate steps that Pennsylvania must take to prevent COVID-19 from claiming more lives and causing needless suffering in LTC facilities.

Some of the over three dozen recommendations include:

- Test all residents and staff on a regular basis, and mandate that anyone who is discharged from a hospital into an LTC facility be tested with test results communicated before being transferred.
- Use a transparent process to revise old regulations that fail to ensure sufficient infection prevention, staffing levels, training hours, and hygiene practices.
- Put residents and staff members into cohorts on separate wings or floors, to limit the spread of COVID-19 from those who are infected to those who are not.
- Require LTC facilities to allow in-person essential caregiver and compassionate care visits following COVID-19 safety precautions.
- Monitor and ensure the quality of care and appropriateness of infection control inside LTC facilities.
- Address racial and economic disparities in care, as early data has shown disproportionately bad outcomes for both residents of color and residents of facilities primarily funded by Medicaid.
- Ensure that LTC facilities’ staff be provided with at least two weeks sick pay, ongoing hazard pay, sufficient training, personal protective equipment (PPE), and mental health supports to deal with the depths of the tragedy that is COVID-19.

These common-sense measures can be quickly implemented. Pennsylvania has taken some steps towards addressing the COVID-19 crisis in LTC facilities, including making the state laboratory available for testing and using CARES funding to support LTC facilities in their safety efforts. But Pennsylvania still has time to implement additional measures to prevent COVID-19 related deaths in LTC facilities and other adverse outcomes by adopting these recommendations.

Advocates had been calling for improvements long before the arrival of COVID-19. Understaffing and significant infection control violations have been documented by advocates and the media for years. Now, with the pandemic ravaging LTC facilities, Pennsylvania must finally take steps to ensure the rights, health and safety of Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable residents.


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